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C:\c2\wartype (Issue raised by Hertsgaard's attempt to describe my project for Bob Gottlieb: "Inadvertent war."
8 July 1989

[There is no single word or short phrase that accurately conveys the path most likely to lead to nuclear war: nuclear war erupting out of a crisis or non-nuclear war, in major part on the basis of prior contingency planning and preparations and high-level decisions that are deliberate, though reflecting (like all human decisions) some degree of uncertainty, ignorance, lack of foresight, unconcern, miscalculation, misinformation, faulty communication, learning or memory, imperfect control, uncontrolled initiatives by subordinates or allies, stress, a variety of motives and incentives, some covert, some "unconscious," and various emotional factors).

Despite all the latter factors, which will always be present, the term "accidental" war suggests too strongly a critical role for equipment failure (as in the false alarms in 1978), which may well not be present at all.

"Inadvertent war" or "unintended war" or "undesired war" or "unforeseen war" downplays the role of prior contingency planning, possible threats, and the actual role of deliberate, purposive (even if hasty, impulsive, emotional, wrongheaded) decisionmaking by high authorities (as distinct from unauthorized actions by subordinates or allies, which may also be a factor, but not, usually, the final determinant).

Thus, it overemphasizes the "surprising, unintentional" quality of the outbreak of war, distracting attention from the human intentionality that has prepared the way for this event, via planning, procurement, deployment, maneuvers, training, indoctrination, R and D, and deliberate decisions in the course of the crisis or non-nuclear war.

On the other hand, these last terms do convey the reality that neither party desires or intends to bring about nuclear war very long before the final decisions that initiate it: before the crisis, or in the early stages of the conventional war. They may have consciously risked such an undesired outcome, but without a high expectation of bringing it about.

And the circumstances that lead immediately up to it, and their own and others' responses in these circumstances, may be quite unforeseen by them and surprising to them: though to observe or in retrospect, this surprise or failure to foresee the possible or probable course of events is itself something to be explained, a failure that may suggest at least unconscious intentionality, ideologically biased or interest-motivated blindness or misperception, a "need not to know."

(Recall Thomas Powers' challenged: Imagine that the war has occurred. Ask yourself: What over the last 40 years ever suggested that it would end any other way?)

Nevertheless, there is a contrast here to deliberate, calculated, aggressive war, conceived and intended significantly in advance: as in the case of Hitler's overall plan of expansion, and even (with a shorter period of planning) his individual campaigns.

Perhaps also: Israel's advance into Lebanon; LBJ's bombing of North Vietnam (the ground "invasion" may or may not have been comparably foreseen prior to major hostilities); Japanese expansion leading up to WWII; Reagan's planning against Nicaragua; Iraq's attack on Iran; possibly, Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia (though partly a "response" to Cambodian incursions). The UK/France/Israel Suez attack; Israel's war in 1967? Egypt's attack in 1973.

Of course, most of these attacks, relatively "premeditated" during conditions that did not constitute crisis or war (though varying degrees of tension or phony war or Cold War), created the conditions of crisis or non-nuclear war out of which the kind of escalation or eruption described above might have exploded (just as various thresholds of violence were crossed in WWII, culminating in Hiroshima, or earlier, strategic bombing of cities, or in Vietnam.

The best terms seem to be--unfortunately, not too communicative to laypersons--"preemptive war" or "escalatory war."

Perhaps "undesired war," if one understands that choice is involved, and perhaps initiative, but a reluctant choice--unforeseen much earlier--of a lesser evil, rather than an expansionist, optimistic war.

Notions of desperation; of explosion, eruption from crisis; of system failure or breakdown (without loss of some high-level control or intentionality)...are also pertinent.

1 August 1989: Perhaps "7-11 War" would be appropriate: to convey that the initiation of war in question is no more and no less "deliberate, intended, desired, planned" than is the typical killing of a store manager or customers by the armed robber of a convenience store: who has brought in a loaded gun ("to threaten" and "for insurance") to commit a crime, yet had neither the desire, intent or expectation to pull the trigger: yet who finds himself doing that, in circumstances he somehow didn't foresee ("Why did the manager threaten me? Why didn't he give in? As would have been rational! Why did General Schneider reach for his pistol, when all we intended was to kidnap him?") yet which are largely stimulated by his own actions.

(Why did the Soviets send nuclear warheads to Cuba?! This seemed so irrational to civilian analysts, as late as 1987, that they couldn't believe the Soviets had done so...till the Soviets confirmed it in early 1989.) (Why nuclear warheads for SNF in Europe?!) (Question: Are there nuclear warheads, on either side of the border, in Europe? Why?)

Given actual practice, it shouldn't be so hard to make it credible that threats of totally irrational actions might be carried out. The problem really is, a cognitive bias to supposing the opponent, and oneself, to be rational: systematic denial of reality, misunderstanding or forgetting of history, failure to project our own failings or to perceive them/

Or, perhaps our threats simply are more credible than we suppose; it wasn't so hard to make them credible, and we succeeded. Yet people find themselves defying threats they would prefer not to have to challenge, or would prefer not facing; they gamble, desperately.

And they might do the same even if the threats were far more credible than they actually are; the need to defy the threat--under certain crisis circumstances, where the alternative is "loss of honor" or personal status-- is "inelastic" with respect to the scale and credibility of the threat. This the threatener commonly fails to imagine or foresee; he can't imagine people being that irrational, even though he is often himself, and may be so in the same confrontation. (See Cuba II; World War I).

Unpremeditated War.

Preemptive War. (With the goal--in the nuclear era--not necessarily of "winning" in any prenuclear sense, but of "prevailing" in some restricted sense: being stronger than the opponent after the exchange has ended, or stronger than one would have been if struck first. And particularly, with the goal of limiting damage, compared to being struck first.

However, the pursuit of damage-limiting capabilities--eschewing an arms control or reduction agreement in this pursuit--will often be accompanied by a rising level of damage to be expected if struck first, or if struck second (with the difference between these going either up or down: in the worst case, going up, in a way that makes war more likely in a crisis).

The pursuit of damage-limiting capability is thus "paradoxical," or "counter-productive," in that as a result of this pursuit--which precludes certain arms control agreements which would ban such capabilities, and precludes unilaterally foregoing them, and stimulates both imitation and countermeasures in the opponent--both the damage to be expected from striking first (or second) rises over time, and so does the likelihood of war, hence the expectation of damage (over peace/war). (The latter implies

that for each, the opponent's countermeasures lag, so that there is increasing effectiveness of first strike. This was not true during the Sixties, and Seventies and early Eighties, but it is the likely result of a continued arms race through the Nineties: as it was true from the mid-Fifties through the early Sixties. Thus we are moving into a second process of destabilization, in our actual programs (which Bush continues to press), despite the changes in Gorbachev's "new thinking."